

The Paradigm Shift: Leadership Challenges in the Public Sector Schools in Pakistan

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Abstract

Previous research has established that school heads as leaders are vital to the successful implementation of educational reforms (Derek, 2009; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Education system in Pakistan is going through a paradigm shift from teacher centered to learner centered classrooms using English as the instructional language. The present work intends to study the school heads' role in this changing scenario. This research aims to explore how the school heads are managing the change in the public sector schools in Punjab, in order to inform in the training programs designed to sensitize the school heads towards the most recent teaching methods and effective school management strategies. The paper does not intend to present conclusive evidence to verify or refute theories, but rather provide an understanding of the leadership challenges and responsibilities, unique to the public sector head teachers in the Punjab schools. The conclusions, as documented in this study reflect the findings that the main challenges confronting the educational leadership in the public sector schools include infrastructure and resource issues; teacher recruitment issues; school organization and student enrollment issues; parental involvement and political pressure. The present research is therefore intended to make contributions to the literatures on the challenges and training needs of the school heads in the public sector schools.

Keywords: sensitizing head teachers, leadership challenges, educational reforms, professional development

1. Introduction

Every profession needs leaders, and education is no exception. In today's rapidly changing academic environment, experienced school leaders with skills needed to address key challenges and raise student achievement have become an essential component of the paradigm shift. School leadership has undergone a radical transformation in the past decade. Where once it was enough for a head teacher or principal to be simply an administrator, the changing times have, made their roles more demanding. A teacher is undeniably one of the most visible people at school; however, ultimately it is the head/principal's responsibility for ensuring an educational environment where best academic attainments are likely (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). The principal as a leader, mentor, and instructor is the link that connects the school and the home. This is important both for students' development and success of schools (Payne, 2006). Although specific duties of principals vary depending on the school level they oversee, there are several factors that are common to bringing about the changes and developments needed in the public sector schools. With the shift in methodologies and approaches to education we now hold them more accountable than ever for the improvement and enhancement of an atmosphere supportive to individual student learning and development (Iqbal, 2005). Although training for teachers at the beginning of their careers is now mandatory; heads/principals on the other hand are less likely to receive any training for their management roles. Professional support for principals is generally lacking once they begin work (Williams & Cummings, 2005).

In Pakistan, governance and management at the school level has not received much attention till quite recently. Successive educational policies in the past have been unable to bring about any significant change in the quality of education at the school level." Weak governance and management" is the primary reason for the poor quality of education in the public sector as pointed out in the UNESCO report (2006). As we struggle to achieve success in our move towards change the need for better educational leaders is even more evident. This lack of research prevents policy makers and decision-makers from understanding the scope of challenges that confront the school leaders in Pakistan. A number of education reforms in the public sector have highlighted the critical role of school leadership in school improvement and management development. In Punjab the Education Sector Reform Program (PESRP) acknowledged the role of school leadership as being instrumental in preparing teachers for their future responsibilities and improving student outcomes. For that reason, it is essential that the school leaders are equipped with the skills and management strategies necessary to best use the available

resources for turning schools into effective schools (Sheikh & Zainab, 2006). In order to adopt an efficient approach for the professional development of school leaders in Pakistan, attention to the roles and challenges of school leaders in the public sector schools, must be the focus of research.

The terms school leaders, heads, head teachers, and principals are used interchangeably in this paper; each carries the same meaning.

1.1 Purpose

The paper aims to explore the head teachers'/principals' perspectives on challenges faced in managing the change with particular focus on effective school management and administration in the public sector schools in Punjab.

1.2 Research questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do heads/principals in public sector schools perceive their leadership roles?
2. What are the challenges in managing the change towards a learner centered school environment, and supporting the English language teachers trained in the new teaching methodologies?

1.3 Significance of the study

The findings of this study may be useful to explain the implication of leadership roles in the paradigm shift in education and explore issues which create barriers to effective role of school heads. The findings would be valuable in informing the educational leadership and management courses as well as professional development programs from which important lessons can be drawn. Further the findings can inform trainers of educational leaders on issues they need to prepare the heads about, so as to make them effective educational leaders. Finally the study will contribute to the minimal research on the leadership and management challenges unique to the public school environment in the Pakistani context.

2. Literature review

Leadership is the process of influencing a group towards achievement of goals; however, not all leaders necessarily have the capabilities or skills of effective managers. The ability to influence others does not inevitably suggest the individual can also manage effectively (Hallinger & Heck, 2010), consequently, not all leaders should be managers. The leadership in education means leading the actions of those engaged in teaching towards the achievement of the set organizational goals. In the educational set up this leadership is carried out by the schools head/principals.

Research suggests that the role of the principal as a leader is critical in creating school environment that lead to better student academic performance (Harris, 2004; Levine, 2005). While, Derek (2009) recommended frequent trainings for the school managers and administrators in order to revitalize their management skills. Principals as leaders are in the best position to provide teachers with the professional development strategies needed to improve skills and influence student outcomes raise student achievement (Lindstrom & Speck, 2004).

In the past few decades, there has been a dramatic change in the traditional responsibilities of the principals with student learning and achievement remaining the main concerns, resulting in the principals spending more time in classrooms than in their office (The Wallace Foundation, 2012). Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) further suggest that the principal's influence on student achievement within a school is second only to that of the teacher, as other student outcomes are also affected. Moreover, as Branch, Hanushek and Rivkin (2012), point out effective principals are more likely to provide teachers with the support and motivation required to be effective teachers.

Nearly all the existing literature on school effectiveness and improvement in the developed countries, place a strong emphasis on the role of leader in setting a goal for the school, characteristically focused around improved teaching and learning, and effectively motivating others to commit and work towards this vision (Southworth, 2002). In order to bring about improvements within the schools the head teachers need to be facilitated in improving their professional skills. It is essential that professional development programs for school leaders are compatible with the specific teacher needs in order to enhance the effectiveness of the teaching practices (Chapman, 2002). Moreover, Rizvi & Elliott (2007) found that teachers with appropriate professional knowledge were more confident in performing different tasks, as compared to their untrained colleagues, in the classroom.

Although the leadership roles from the education perspective have been the focus of Western research for some time, however in the case of Pakistan, the public school system as the largest source of education faces

a grave situation. Andrabi suggests that the “management and supervision crisis” in the public sector makes teachers less accountable to school managers (as cited in Khan, 2004). School leadership and their capacity building have largely remained ignored in the educational landscape. In the backdrop of the educational reforms it is only recently that the traditional role of school leadership has come under review; in addition a number of initiatives in the Punjab Education Sector Reforms Program (PESRP) have also been introduced to improve the role of the school leadership, however information as to what extent these ideas are effective is not readily available. Efforts to bring about changes in teaching practices are often hindered by an absence of awareness and commitment on the part of the heads/principals in the public sector educational institutions (Shafa, 2003).

In their study on the role of heads in the context of developing countries, Simkins, Sisum, and Memon (2003) reiterated that in the Pakistan context the role of school heads is essential for any significant improvement in student outcomes. Likewise, in an earlier study Brown and Rutherford (1998), observed that head teachers although motivated to make changes are constrained by administrative and traditional pressures, and are often unable to act independently. Khaki (2006) while investigating the influence of contextual factors on the nature of leadership found that although similar in their vision of providing quality education they differed largely due to their background, beliefs and organizational settings.

Most head teachers in different levels of public sector educational institutions lack essential leadership skills as they come from the teaching staff, selected on the basis of their years of teaching experience (Khan, 2012; Memon & Bana, 2005). Their lack of training limits their ability to take efficient decisions in the day to day situations as management and interpersonal skills are largely ignored in recruiting the head teachers (Khan, 2012). This emphasis on administrative approach leaves little room for leadership (Khaki, 2006).

Research also suggests that although in place; the qualification and training standards for those entering the teaching profession in the public sector are much lower compared to other countries (UNESCO, 2006). The problems in the teacher training programs include an over emphasis on theory, limited practice opportunities, and lack of research and evaluation of teacher training programs (Dilshad, 2010). According to Memon (2000) principals in the public sector schools usually look after management related concerns; being less inclined to supervise or guide their teachers on pedagogical concerns. This argument is supported by Rizvi (2008), who in her study concedes that school heads are reluctant to change their practices as it would undermine their influence; this attitude limits them to working in an administrative capacity instead of being actively involved in curriculum design and instructional practices. While, Alam (2012) in his study maintains that strengthening the head teachers’ capabilities is related to the success of any initiative as active involvement of the head teacher is the key factor in improved student outcomes. While discussing likely solutions, Kanwar (2000) recommends that it is vital for heads to be conscious of the recent school leadership best practices and methods and develop realistic skills by modifying changes in their attitudes.

3. Methodology

The study explores the head teachers’ perceptions by gathering data from focus group and interviews which provided insights into the head teachers’ role, in an attempt to understand the issues and challenges confronting them in carrying out effective leadership roles in their schools. The population of the study consisted of the government school heads from Punjab and the training instructors. The study was delimited to the public schools heads undergoing the leadership and management training at the Directorate of Staff Development Lahore.

3.1 Research Design

The purpose of my study was to explore the head teachers/principals perceptions, with respect to the leadership challenges experienced in the public sector schools. A general inductive approach to understand the issues as perceived by the participants (Trochim, 2000), was employed that would focus on and describe outcomes specific to the context (Charles & Mertler 2002). The goal of this study is not to generalize, but rather to provide an interpretation of the findings meaningful to the realities of the research subjects (Swann, 2003), therefore focus group method was found suitable to acquire the necessary information. The focus group dynamic create an environment conducive to sharing of opinions that individual data collection does not provide (Litosseliti, 2003).

3.2 Participants

Convenience sampling was used to draw samples from the head teachers/principals participating in the leadership and management training on the basis of their “availability and accessibility to the researcher” (Castello, 2009). The participants had volunteered to take part in the study and were interested in sharing their experiences.

3.3 Instrument

The views and experiences shared by the participants' in the focus group discussions were recorded digitally. Additionally, notes were also taken during each session and the entire conversation was peer reviewed after the session. The training instructors were interviewed individually at a time convenient to them. Of the six trainers four were available for the interviews. This helped to make clarifications regarding questions asked in the focus groups and to prepare further probing questions on a need basis for the participants' responses.

3.4 Data Collection

Data for the current study was collected from focus group discussions and training instructor interviews. As a strategy for enhancing participation, focus groups were led by facilitators (training instructors). In all, 6 focus groups were conducted during the training with heads/head teachers/principals in mixed groups. The focus group duration was 2 hours, and discussions were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed in English. The FGDs offered the opportunity to exploit group dynamics and explore the participants' experiences and elicit, by probing, new themes as they emerged. The interview guide provided an agenda for open-ended questioning (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The interviewer asked the participants to discuss in general about the practices with examples from their own experiences.

Data validation was done by member checking (Harper & Cole, 2012), frequently used as a quality control mechanism to improve the credibility and validity of data collected. The transcribed data and interpretations were taken back to the participants in the study, allowing them to analyze and comment on the findings (Creswell, 2007), to confirm the credibility of the information. The present study used member checking during (1) the focus groups where the concepts were reviewed so as to clarify and provide details for the analyses and (2) a post-focus group session, where findings were discussed informally allowing observations on emerging themes and patterns that contributed to the results.

The sample size and the nature of the open-ended questions do not allow for statistical precision in qualitative research. The study makes no claim for generalizability, but ultimately aims through description and reporting of the research process to ensure further development of the emerging research themes.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis may be relatively simple, involving a summary of major themes, or may call for more complex content analyses and comparisons of groups (Goldenkoff, 2004). Nvivo 10 data analysis software was used for data analysis in this study. The data from the focus group transcripts as well as the instructor interviews was read several times and summarized. Key ideas were identified and grouped in related categories and analyzed further to classify key themes across all transcripts. The recurring themes are integrated into the research findings.

3.6 Ethical Concerns

Ethical principles in research require a realistic bond between the researcher and the participants (Vazir, 2004). Therefore, the following measures were taken into consideration during the data collection process, to ensure compliance of research ethical standards:

- Research participant were selected by informing about purpose and process of the research and informed consent was taken.
- Participation in the study was voluntary and participants could withdraw from the study at any stage Confidentiality and anonymity of the participant was ensured by using numbers in place of their names.

4. Findings

The data analysis revealed four predominant themes across the focus groups, concentrating on general challenges, administrative, traditional and teacher competence-related issues. Each emerging theme is presented in the findings

4.1 General Challenges

The participants discussed a range of issues that hindered the development of a proactive leadership role in their school environment and commented thus:

“Yes...we are teachers but it is not possible to teach lessons in class ...as head teacher I have much work with parents to talk to ; education department visits; as well as writing monthly reports makes it impossible for me to teach also.” (Head teacher FGD, 3 on 03.05.2014)

One of the key findings of this study reveals that most of the heads are conscious that effective head teachers play positive roles and exhibit awareness of the change in their roles as that of a manager, instructor and a facilitator. However, as the data shows that in spite of the school heads acceptance of their many roles in the changing leadership context, their approach remains conventional with an emphasis on administrative work. Memon (2000) also highlighted this focus on managerial work by the public sector schools heads.

Absence of a robust infrastructure was another limitation; with schools lacking basic amenities; furniture and rooms. Findings indicate that the heads were severely constrained when it came to handling issues regarding the basic facilities. A participant pointed out: "We have no training specifically to help us cope with the problems we face on a daily basis" (Head teacher FGD, 1 on 02.05.2014)

Lack of training was another such factor impeding the development of a strong leadership role. As discussed earlier Dilshad, (2010) also specified in his study that the teacher training programs were riddled with issues and lacked focus. The participants raised concerns that changes in their roles needed support and training opportunities were rare. Several participants commented on the absence of clear policy on the head teachers' preparation for leadership positions; resulting in the heads keeping to the traditional managerial roles in their schools.

The findings suggest that the heads are uncertain of their ability to sustain efforts and improve outcomes. With the teachers receiving training in the new methodologies it was necessary that the heads are also sensitized to ensure that measures for the shift remain in place. This, in turn would contribute to heads becoming supportive towards their teachers, as well as a significant aspect in enhanced learner outcomes. The findings of the study by Alam (2012) showed that such interventions are instrumental in effecting the professional approaches of the head teacher.

4.1.1 Language barriers

Lack of English language skills emerged as a prominent theme in all focus groups and the interviews. Participants discussed frustrations and difficulties of not being able to communicate in English. Across many focus groups, participants also discussed that decisions on the medium of instruction remained a problem area in most public sector schools. Many felt that the emphasis on English contributed to an overall sense of isolation and, resulted in feeling as if they were being forced out of the system. The same was felt as far as teacher training was concerned where the training was conducted in English whereas the classroom instruction was in Urdu.

4.2 System Challenges

System challenges and impediments to effective leadership roles were noticeable themes that emerged in all focus groups. The, participants discussed a variety of factors that inhibited them from effectively carrying out their role as envisioned in the shift towards a more learner friendly school environment.

The findings from the training instructor interviews highlighted some key areas which included;

4.2.1 Shortage of teaching staff

Punjab still faces a shortage of 61,916 teachers (AEPAM, 2012) in its public sector schools. There is a disparity with some schools short of teaching staff while others are overstaffed. Lack of appropriate screening and relaxing of qualification requirements have jeopardized teachers' selection on merit directly affecting the end objective of providing quality education.

As one of the participants pointed out, "I was appointed as head teacher after serving as a subject specialist for five years and good students result in the final examinations for class five" (Head teacher FGD 5 on 05.5.2014). This suggests that promotion of teachers to school heads is mostly based on teaching experience and student results. The findings indicate that such promotions created a gap with fewer teachers available to take on specialized subject teaching positions that ultimately led to problems in both teaching and leadership roles.

4.2.2 Rationalization and deployment

The findings further indicate that the student teacher ratios (STRs) in many of the public sector schools went over 70:1; while the official student teacher ratio remained at was 35:1. The heads pointed out that in areas where the STRs were not optimum, transfer/relocation of the teacher into areas away from their home created another challenge. As most teachers did not want to move away from their hometowns

The findings from the discussion also suggest that the 'No refusal to admission policy' where all children are allowed to come to school added to the already constrained STRs leading to overcrowded

classrooms severely pressuring the teachers. Students absent for long period were also allowed to rejoin their classes irrespective of their age group and level.

4.3 Administrative issues

An overall lack of opportunities for observing alternative classroom practices due to work load and environment; duties like administering polio drops Universal primary education drive; frequent education department visits ; translation method of instruction and lack of logistical support all added up to the administrative issues that the head teachers had to contend with on a daily basis.. The heads also pointed out that the teachers were not cooperative in the development and implementation of new policies for training of teachers.

4.4 Community Issues

4.4.1 Resistance to change

Many participants talked about making deliberate efforts within the available resources as a means of improving the environment in their schools. In a majority of focus groups, however, participants reported ignoring or overlooking a variety of issues, and keeping to the status quo. For many, the traditional systems were the only way and implementing any change may lead to loss of position and power as pointed out by Rizvi (2008) earlier. This was particularly true for participants who came from remote areas of Punjab where the traditional mindset of the community hindered the implementation of any change in the school environment, learning and teaching. The training instructors interviewed also pointed out the head teachers' resistance to concepts and ideas introduced during the training. "They are so set in their outdated traditional routines that changing the way they work will take a long time" (PI: 3).

4.4.2 Parental support

A majority of parents sending their children to the public sector schools are illiterate. Participants discussed the additional issues that included misdirected parental backing, awareness of only the traditional methods of teaching and learning and keeping children out of school meant that many do not know how to respond if their children disagree with them about schoolwork and keep them in school. Regulating students' dropout rate by convincing the parents was an additional problem.

4.4.3 Political interference and pressure groups

Political interference and teacher unions were prominent themes that emerged in all focus groups. Most heads attributed a large number of their problems to transfers and appointments of staff done on political bases. This was particularly true for participants who came from areas where the traditional mindset of the political presence considered schools and education unimportant. Participants discussed the pressure from these groups obstructed them from effectively working in their school environments. Examples of such cases included, 1) teachers obtaining transfers, often through political backing to schools nearer their place of residence; 2) difficulties created by teachers groups against the principal and 3) teacher unions becoming a resisting force.

4.4 Teacher competence

Across all focus groups, participants discussed a number of issues related to the lack of English language teaching skills in the teachers'. The findings revealed that the teachers' ability to use English language in the classroom was a major limitation in the transformation needed in the classroom environment. Teachers have lagged behind in developing the core competencies essential to their teaching, on which subsequent knowledge and skills are built upon.

As suggested by the research (Southworth, 2002; Chapman, 2002; Rizvi & Elliott, 2007), facilitating the head in improving their professional skills would support any desired improvement in the school environment, as long as teacher needs were being met.

The teachers in most schools were confident about their traditional methods and feared their knowledge and skills becoming obsolete. They were wary of the new approaches and avoided using English in the classroom. The findings further suggest that the heads felt that the teachers reluctance to change; keeping to the traditional teaching methods were a key challenge. Similarly, the findings also showed that the trained teachers' although enthusiastic, avoided using the new methodologies and in most cases went along with the status quo. The heads reported that as the untrained teachers' negative attitudes; the noisy classrooms and extra work created by the learner centered activities were the most common reasons given by the teachers. Most teachers focused on ensuring that the students knew enough to sit for the yearly exam and did well as the teacher evaluation was based on the student results.

5. Conclusion

The study sought answers to two questions: (1) How do heads/principals in public sector schools perceive their leadership roles? and (2) what are the challenges in managing the change towards a learner centered school environment, and supporting the English language teachers trained in the new teaching methodologies? The findings are not generalizable statistically; however, the ability of the reader to generalize into his or her own situation was the goal of this study, not statistical generalization.

For most of the head teacher's in the public sector schools duties in the administrative capacity take up most of time. The study offers evidence to review and re-conceptualize the head teachers' role taking into account the issues and challenges faced. Factors hindering the head's effectiveness including the frequently changing administrative policies, inadequate departmental support, understaffing, political interference, and unsupportive parents. Each of these issues requires specific skills or behaviors on the part of the head teacher in order to successfully implement the changes in the school environment.

The head teacher's perception of their role remains unchanged primarily due to the lack of administrative support; however there is an overall acceptance that the heads' traditional role of a manager must transform into the wholesome leadership roles of a facilitator, mentor, a community leader and a counselor in order to become a part of the paradigm shift. The head teacher's role in management and governance are vital for improved outcomes for the change. Leadership research and training must also be closely linked to evidence on effective leadership best practices. Such orientation could increase the impact of school leadership on student outcomes.

The study concluded that in Pakistan school heads accept that their leadership roles are undergoing a shift however the traditional approach towards the heads role as that of an administrator is still strong. The study also found that according to the school heads, the pressures at the administrative level remains the larger challenge as expectations to improve outcomes do not consider these constraints.

Findings from this study indicate that, the challenges in the recruitment, retention and deployment processes for heads as well as basic design flaws in the policies relating to these processes have essentially remained the same in the public sector school environment; the need for training in leadership for school heads is only just beginning to be felt.

The study further concluded that school principals at school level are influenced by long duty hours; an emphasis on administration rather than leadership; and political involvement at the societal level as interference in school affairs. They lack the motivational and management skills to engage the community in education process.

Paradoxically, the study found that the school heads agree that parental participation is essential for education. However, In Pakistan the process of parental participation generally and role of school principal in improving and strengthening participation has been uninspiring. School heads have not been able to play their role effectively in engaging parents in the process of education. They consider parents ill-equipped in terms of knowledge and skills to understand the process of education, and view parental involvement in education as creating more management issues for the schools rather than solutions.

Consequently, influenced by these challenges the job of school leader is viewed as difficult, demanding, separated from teaching, lacking support, and unsatisfactory. The result of these influences and perceptions has created a visible gap as the teachers although experienced are incapable of taking on their new role as the school head, primarily due to lack of training and preparation.

Future Research

Future research can consider a comparative analysis of the similarities and differences among the high school, middle school, and elementary school levels. Interviews or questionnaires of several principals that have tried the more innovative approaches and have been successful could be analyzed for any significant findings. Lastly a survey or study of parents and students would lend an interesting perspective to the body of knowledge concerning what it takes to be a successful principal.

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